

Transport and Environment committee

10.00am, Thursday, 31 March 2022

Edinburgh Recycling Centres – Motion from Transport and Environment Committee

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1. Recommendations

- 1.1 It is recommended that the Transport and Environment Committee:
 - 1.1.1 Approve the continuing use of the Household Waste Recycling Centre (HWRC) booking system; and
 - 1.1.2 Agree to discharge the amended Motion approved by the Transport and Environment Committee on [11 November 2021](#).

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Edinburgh Recycling Centres – Motion from Transport and Environment Committee

2. Executive Summary

- 2.1 The report sets out the background to the use of the current booking system for visits to Household Waste Recycling Centres (HWRCs) which was introduced in May 2020 to allow sites to reopen safely and support physical distancing during the coronavirus pandemic but has been found to deliver a number of unforeseen benefits both for customers and for the efficient and safe operation of the sites, as set out below.
- 2.2 The report seeks Committee's agreement to retain the booking system and to discharge the action from Committee on 11 November 2021 on Edinburgh Recycling Centres.

3. Background

- 3.1 In the very early stages of the Coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic all HWRC sites across Scotland were closed from late March 2020 to early June 2020.
- 3.2 In advance of reopening the sites in Edinburgh, it was agreed to introduce a system which required residents to book visits so that demand could be managed, and physical distancing maintained.
- 3.3 On 11 November 2021, Transport and Environment Committee considered a Motion by the Liberal Democrat Group and Deputation from Unite the Union and Unison regarding Edinburgh Recycling Centres and the following amendment was agreed:
 - 3.3.1 To note that an online booking system was introduced for Edinburgh recycling centres in June 2020 to ensure they could be reopened safely following the COVID-19 related closure.
 - 3.3.2 To note the comments from the Transport and Environment Convener at the September 2020 meeting of the Council where she confirmed it would be for the Transport and Environment Committee to decide whether to maintain the booking system on a long term basis.
 - 3.3.3 To recognise that the appointment booking system has been warmly welcomed by staff who have experienced calmer better working conditions as

a result with reduced instances of aggression; that the system appears to work very well, reducing queuing time for residents and ensuring a more even use of the recycling sites throughout the day. The social distancing that this system more easily provides is also still considered important for the ease of both staff and residents.

- 3.3.4 To note that initial concerns from residents during the early period of implementation have abated considerably over time and that onsite staff report plentiful positive comments from the public focussing on a preference for the new system, that they can access sites more easily without queuing and that they can complete visits faster than previously.
- 3.3.5 To note that it has helped prevent use of the recycling centres by non-Edinburgh residents or businesses which had previously been an operational concern and cost.
- 3.3.6 To note that the cost of implementing the system was only £7,500 and recognised the long term value of this Covid response to longer term waste operations.
- 3.3.7 To note that since the appointments system was adopted over 740,000 bookings had taken place to date.
- 3.3.8 To note that it may be possible to expand some capacity using the appointments system at some or all of the three recycling sites and requests a report to the Transport and Environment Committee in March 2021 which outlines this and describe the operational impacts of this new method of working.
- 3.3.9 To request that this report also provided officer recommendations on whether the system should be retained for Committee decision.

4. Main report

- 4.1 The booking system, which was introduced to allow HWRCs to reopen in a safe manner in June 2020, has enabled physical distancing to be maintained on each site, ensuring safety of staff and the public, has led to a reduction or elimination of:
 - 4.1.1 Queues on roads around the sites and congestion on local roads affecting other road users and public transport (including police attendance at sites due to road congestion);
 - 4.1.2 Antisocial behaviour on site between members of the public;
 - 4.1.3 Unannounced early closures on busy days; and
 - 4.1.4 Threatening behaviour toward staff.
- 4.2 In addition:
 - 4.2.1 Site users can get in quickly, not have to queue to enter sites, use the skips on site with fewer people around and have an overall faster visit to the HWRC;

- 4.2.2 The booking system has evened out demand through the week. In the past, weekends and public holidays were very busy at the recycling centres, but the balancing of demand that the system provides has eliminated these 'problem days'; and
- 4.2.3 The booking system enabled limiting of vans and trailers (on any vehicle) to certain hours of the day (8.30 – 10.00am). This has resulted in a faster flow of users through the sites as historic problems of vans / trailers taking much longer to unload and physically taking more space than a car have been eliminated. This has decreased congestion onsite and led to faster visits for the majority of users (in cars).
- 4.3 Since June 2020 the booking system has continued to be used and has enabled the HWRCs to remain open through various subsequent lockdowns and changing levels of restrictions.
- 4.4 The booking system is web based and takes two to three minutes for most people to book. Bookings can also be made over the phone on 0131 200 2000 (8am - 5pm Monday to Thursday and 8am - 3.40pm on Fridays) for those people unable to make a web booking. Bookings are usually available for the next day, and often for the same day.
- 4.5 The system has remained popular with many site users and the service continues to receive good feedback about it (following initial unprecedented levels of praise from the public with over 500 compliments were received about the booking system in the weeks after its introduction). Appendix 1 provides more information.
- 4.6 Over 911,000 bookings to visit an HWRC have been made since the system was introduced, and it is anticipated that one million visits will have been made to Edinburgh HWRCs by summer 2022. Edinburgh HWRC sites are significantly busier than other authorities' HWRCs, with more households per HWRC in Edinburgh than in any other Scottish city.
- 4.7 Whilst other authorities may not use booking systems, or not use them for all site visits, they do enforce other restrictions, including on types of vehicles, holding vehicles at the gate and turning people away at busy times. These restrictions can have a greater negative effect on residents using sites than the booking system.
- 4.8 As noted in the paragraphs above, although the booking system was introduced purely in response to COVID-19, it has proved to have numerous other benefits to both Edinburgh residents and to the service.
- 4.9 Site staff are in favour of retaining the system and believe that the sites work better for residents and staff alike, with calmer working conditions and less aggression from some members of public. As Committee will recall from the November meeting, both Unison and Unite spoke in favour of retaining the booking system.
- 4.10 The booking system has enabled the service to gain 'usage data' (included in Appendices 1 and 3) and to adapt the service to improve customer experiences.
- 4.11 For example, increased opening of the HWRCs by one hour (to 6pm) four nights a week (from 31 January 2022) gives residents more options as evenings become

lighter, with an immediate four hours of extra opening per week at each site (12 hours per week of extra opening across the city).

- 4.12 The data has also highlighted underutilised times of the day. This has allowed alternations to services e.g. at Craigmillar, where no vans are allowed at all, and only cars with trailers were allowed between 8.30-10.00am (in line with the van / trailer and car and trailer slots at Bankhead and Seafield). These car and trailer slots at Craigmillar were not well utilised, so the service has recently allowed cars in these slots as well.
- 4.13 Based on usage data available, a trial of opening Seafield HWRC one hour earlier, at 7.30 for cars, seven days a week, is also underway.
- 4.14 These three steps have increased the numbers of available slots by over 1,490 per week.
- 4.15 There have been complaints of increased fly-tipping since outbreak of COVID-19. However, this issue is not specific to Edinburgh and is being reported across the UK. This issue predates the closure of HWRC sites, and local authorities with no booking system have also experienced levels of increased fly tipping as well.

Conclusion

- 4.16 Based on all of the above, the service would like to retain the system as one of the 'new ways of working' which were tried during the pandemic and have led to improved services to the point that officers consider that these methods of working should be retained.
- 4.17 It is possible that the data provided from the booking system could support further increases in the opening hours of the sites in the future, at no extra revenue cost (this would be subject to employee engagement and possible changes to working patterns).
- 4.18 In addition, the system will support better control over illegal disposal of commercial waste and inappropriate use of Edinburgh's HWRCs by people from outwith the area on an on-going basis.

5. Next Steps

- 5.1 Should committee approve the retention of the booking system, there will be no change to current practices but information from the booking system will continue to be used to improve the operation of the sites and to improve their accessibility.

6. Financial impact

- 6.1 The booking system had to be introduced at short notice as part of the Council's COVID-19 response. Costs are low (£4,000 per annum) and benefits are high, as set out above.
- 6.2 The £4,000 annual cost of the system can be met through existing service budgets.

7. Stakeholder/Community Impact

- 7.1 Whilst no formal public consultation has been carried out, the service has received unprecedented levels of compliments since the booking system was introduced, and many residents have told site staff and officers that they would like the booking system to remain on a permanent basis.
- 7.2 An integrated impact assessment (IIA) checklist has been completed which highlighted few issues with the system. A data protection impact assessment was also completed. Mitigations are in place to allow people who cannot use the internet to book by phone.
- 7.3 Use of the system is helping to ensure the Council complies with its regulatory responsibilities with regards to commercial waste and ceasing use of the system would be likely to reintroduce health and safety issues both with regard to public health and infection control, as well as staff safety and abuse.

8. Background reading/external references

- 8.1 Site usage data is available from officers, if required.

9. Appendices

- 9.1 Appendix 1 - HWRC booking system: Usage data
- 9.2 Appendix 2 - Health and Safety Statistics

Appendix 1 - Usage Data

Overview

Since the booking system was introduced in June 2020, over 911,000 bookings have been made.

Of the bookings made, approximately 81% of those were completed (i.e. the site was visited). 12% of bookings were cancelled by the customer and 6% of customers did not show up for their appointment.

These bookings were made by c.86,000 Edinburgh households (roughly 36% of Edinburgh households). Around half (49%) of the c.86,000 households have visited either once or twice

The majority of visits (95%) are by car, with 3.6% of visits being vans and 0.9% cars with trailers. 0.25% of site visits are by bike or cargo bike. The remainder are vans with trailers.

Waiting time (for a slot)

At present, many slots at each HWRC are being booked the day before, or on the day of the visit. This varies at sites across the city, but it is very easy at all sites to book an appointment for the same day or next day if required. The recent increase in evening opening at all sites (and in morning opening at Seafield) gives more options for residents to visit the HWRCs.

The waiting time has decreased significantly since 2020 when the system was first introduced and there was the significant demand following the first lockdown when HWRCs were closed. At that stage there were significantly longer waiting times until the this backlog cleared.

The table below shows the 'wait time' between people booking their appointment and the actual appointment, for a full year (October 2020 – October 2021 and in the summer months (when HWRCs are typically at their busiest) and autumn months.

	October 2020 to October 2021	1 July to 31 October 2021
Wait time	Percentage of visits	Percentage of visits
Same day	31%	38%
Next day	32%	33%
2 days	13%	13%
3 days	7%	7%
4 days	5%	4%
5 days	4%	2%
6 days	3%	1%
7 days	2%	1%
8 days	1%	Everything over 8 days totals 1%
9 days	1%	
	Everything over 10 days totals 1%	

As the table shows, from October 2020 to October 2021, 76% of visits were booked for 'same day, next day or 2 days' time' and in the summer / autumn period (four months), that improved to 84% of visits booked for 'same day, next day or 2 days' time'.

Recent (since October 2021) manual monitoring of the system shows that most mornings, there are still slots available at all sites, so it is very likely that the wait times of 3 days and upwards are being selected by choice by the public, not by limited availability.

Site utilisation

The booking system evens out demand for visits at the sites; each day is split into 30-minute slots and the usage in all slots is relatively well spread, with weekends tending to be slightly busier than weekdays.

The system also provides site utilisation information (based on the number of booked slots each day). On average:

- Craigmillar has a 65% site utilisation rate;
- Seafield has a 73% site utilisation rate; and
- Sighthill has a 95% utilisation rate.

Across all 3 HWRCs, this works out at 78% utilisation. It is important to note that these figures can be easily varied if the numbers of slots per day are adjusted.

It is also possible to see utilisation by each half hour slot, and by day for all, or for individual sites. This can be based on bookings, or time of arrival (some will book and not arrive or will arrive late).

This data is invaluable for the service to continue to meet the demands of residents, and the recent changes to opening hours have been based on this data.

Day	Average utilisation of half hour car slots, across all sites *
Monday	74.9
Tuesday	68.9
Wednesday	69.6
Thursday	61.9
Friday	70.1
Saturday	78.5
Sunday	85.6

* Data is for 1 April to 30 November 2021, by booking slot, marked as visit complete.

Please note that data relating to individuals is deleted after 12 months, therefore an amount of 'averaging' has been used to provide the generalised statistics shown in this Appendix.

Appendix 2 – Health and Safety Statistics

The booking system has led to a significant decrease in aggressive incidents towards staff at HWRCs. These incidents are reported via the Council's Health and Safety (SHE) portal and the summarised statistics are shown below.

In addition to these reported statistics, mainly covering 'major incidents' on sites, many staff have spoken in favour of retaining the booking system as it reduces the amount of 'minor incidents': minor acts of aggression, verbal confrontation etc which are not typically recorded, despite best efforts to encourage recording of these incidents.

2018: (12-month period) - **11 threatening/aggressive reports**

1 Jan 2019 – 23 March 2020: (15-month period, up to the HWRC closing at the start of the pandemic) - **3 threatening/aggressive reports**

1 June 2020 – to 11 February 2022 (20-month period since the sites reopened to present day) - **2 threatening/aggressive reports.**